A test of fairness

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FAST FACTS

- In 2016 Reform Scotland first highlighted the problem that many pupils in S4 were no longer able to study as many subjects as they once could.
- Eight had often been the maximum number of subjects studied at Standard Grade level. Under the new Nat 4s & 5s many pupils, regardless of ability, were only able to study six subjects.
- This appeared to be an unintended consequence of a change to S3 education: where once the Broad General Education (BGE) was studied in first and second year, Curriculum for Excellence extended BGE to cover third year as well.
- Whereas pupils use to specialise at the end of S2, giving two years to study exam content, they were now specialising at the end of S3, meaning only one year to study. This meant a drop in the number of subjects that could be fitted in.
- Revisiting our research in 2019 proved the situation had got worse, with more schools narrowing choice.
- However, this change has not happened everywhere. The independent sector still allows for eight Nat 5s to be studied. So too do many higher performing state schools – creating a postcode lottery in educational opportunity.
- While Reform Scotland welcomes the Government's review of the senior phase, the problem caused by the extension of the BGE should be tackled immediately.
- The Scottish Government should announce that schools are now free to allow pupils to specialise at the end of S2, once again allowing two years for study and ending the reduction in subject choice.

CONTEXT

Three and a half years ago, in May 2016, Reform Scotland published damning evidence which showed the number of exams pupils could sit in fourth year was falling. Subject choice was becoming dependent on where they went to school, not their ability. While some children could sit eight National 4s and 5s, just as previous pupils had been able to sit eight Standard Grades, many could now only sit six. Some pupils could only sit as few as five subjects.

In April 2019 we returned to the issue to examine whether the situation had changed. It had - unfortunately, in many areas it had got worse. In this second report on the issue we also highlighted the fact that the reduction in exams in S4 had not occurred in the independent sector nor in many schools with good academic records.

Since we first reported this issue, the Scottish Parliament's Education & Skills committee has carried out an inquiry into subject choice. While Reform Scotland welcomes the Scottish Government's subsequent review into the senior phase, it is not acceptable to abandon pupils currently heading towards their N4/5 exams and subject choices.

As a result, Reform Scotland believes that in the interim, and to address the current postcode lottery in educational opportunity in S4, the Scottish Government has to make it clear that schools are free to offer the same maximum of eight exams, as in the past, and, in order to deliver this, schools need to be allowed to start N4/5 courses in S3, shifting Broad General Education (BGE) back to S1 and 2 – as before.

Most experts see this subject choice reduction as an unintended consequence of reform. Addressing that consequence cannot be postponed any longer.

BACKGROUND

The data

In 2014, as part of Curriculum for Excellence, the Standard Grade exams system was replaced with National 4 and 5s. Where Standard Grades were taught over a two-year period, National 4 and 5s are supposedly studied in S4 only. The concept of Broad General Education (BGE), previously studied in S1 and S2, was extended up to the end of S3.

However, this change to third year had a timetabling consequence which meant that there was less time available across one year to study for as many exams as had been the case over two years.

Had this been made clear at the time - had parents, pupils and politicians been fully aware of what was going to happen - it is possible, if not probable, that the change wouldn't have occurred. Arguably the reduction in subject choice is an unintended consequence of the change to S3.

However, evidence to the Scottish Parliament's Education and Skills committee's inquiry into subject choice from Education Scotland suggests otherwise: *"When asked whether taking fewer qualifications in S4 was an objective of curricular change rather than an unintended consequence, Alan Armstrong of Education Scotland said it was part of the design. He told the Committee that the policy intention was that in S4, young people would have a reduced number of choices as part of a range of different educational experiences including "leadership, volunteering and other wider experience that will help them through their lives"* [1]

If it was always part of the design of the new system, why was it not highlighted or explained at the introduction of the new exams structure that pupils would not be able to sit as many exams. There was no consultation informing parents that this would happen.

In early 2016 Reform Scotland submitted a number of Freedom of Information requests to local authorities asking what was the maximum number of exams pupils could study for in S4. Our research highlighted that some schools were ignoring the change to S3 and still studying subjects for exam over two years. This meant they could still allow pupils to study for up to eight exams.

However, other schools were following the new curriculum to the letter. The resulting reduction in hours of study afforded by one year rather than two meant that only six subjects could be studied.

This created a huge difference in opportunity based purely on where a pupil went to school.

In 2019 Reform Scotland again asked the same Freedom of Information questions. Unfortunately, the situation had got worse.

For example, in 2016 all schools in Edinburgh, East Dunbartonshire and Dumfries & Galloway offered eight exams. Now no schools in either East Dunbartonshire or Dumfries & Galloway offer eight, and in Edinburgh some schools now only offer six.

Most state schools now only allow pupils to study for a maximum of six subjects.

In our 2019 briefing, Reform Scotland also examined the situation with regard to independent schools in Scotland which followed SQA exams. None of the independent sector schools had reduced the number of exams being studied for in S4.

[1] Scottish Parliament Education & Skills Committee report into subject choice, September 2019: https://digitalpublications.parliament.scot/Committees/Report/ES/2019/9/16/Subject-choices-in-schools#Subject-numbers-in-S4

Why is eight better than six?

The Scottish Government responded to our research by saying that it didn't matter what was studied in S4, and that the focus should be on the totality of qualifications pupils leave school with.

Reform Scotland would not dispute the importance of the end goal, but that justification only makes sense if all schools, or even all state schools, were reducing their subject choice. They are not. Instead a postcode lottery of educational opportunity and choice has been created.

The number of subjects someone can study in S4 is dependent on whether they live in particular catchment area, or can afford to pay for private education.

How, for example, do you explain to parents of pupils at Perth Grammar that their brightest pupils can only study six, while pupils at Crieff High can sit eight; or to the parents at Larbert High where pupils again can only study for six exams, but neighbouring Graeme High allows for eight?

There are many other examples across the country. The independent sector will also still allow its best and brightest pupils to sit eight exams in S4.

At a time when Scotland is trying to encourage a greater interest in areas such as STEM and languages, the reduction in subject choice for most pupils has led to a drop in take-up in these areas. The previous regime offered more scope for pupils to combine practical and academic options.

The Scottish Parliament's Education and Skills committee highlighted its concerns about the impact of the reduction in subject choice, noting in its report:

"*where the curriculum narrows to five or six subjects in S4, there can be challenges for learners who wish to undertake a broad suite of qualifications in traditional subject areas, such as mathematics, English, sciences, social sciences, arts and languages. The Committee considers that the opportunity to retain a breadth of learning throughout secondary school and to gain a broad set of qualifications are cornerstones of Scottish education which are in danger of being lost.*"

The Committee also highlighted the confused thinking and lack of clarity behind the current situation:

"Considered as a whole, the Committee has serious concerns that there is a lack of clarity within the Scottish education system about who has overall responsibility for curricular structure and subject availability in Scottish secondary schools under the Curriculum for Excellence. Empowerment of school leaders and decision-making at the individual school level has many positive attributes, but there can also be negative consequences, such as a lack of consistency and equity in provision between schools."

The 1977 Munn Report which paved the way for Standard Grade established eight 'modes' within the curriculum. Munn's view was influenced by the work of philosopher Paul Hirst, who believed there was a limited number of distinct ways of knowing about the world. The eight-subject structure (outlined below) meant that, even with choice, all pupils continued study in the great majority of ways of knowing about the world in S4.

Eight subject modes:

- Language and communication
- Mathematical studies and applications
- Scientific studies and applications
- Social and environmental studies
- Religious and moral education
- Physical education
- Creative and aesthetic activities
- Technological activities and applications

But still no change…

Despite Reform Scotland highlighting this worrying trend more than three years ago, and again this year, nothing has changed and pupils are still seeing their educational opportunities reduced.

The Scottish Government's announcement of a review into the senior phase of secondary education is undoubtedly welcome, and long overdue. However, it does nothing to address the continuing reduction in choice that pupils face. This cannot continue. While the review looks to a long-term solution, a short-term solution is required for pupils currently approaching S4 exams.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Pupils should have the same opportunity to take an appropriate group of subjects based on their ability, not their postcode.

Of course, pupils with different abilities should be able to take a varying number of subjects in S4. However, the decision over the number of exams they take should be taken by the pupil, in conjunction with their teachers and parents. Currently, that is not the case. It is ironic and disappointing that a policy about extending broad general education into S3 has actually narrowed the education on offer in S4 for many young people.

While the review into the senior phase is welcome, choice for pupils currently approaching Nat 4 and 5 exams over the coming years cannot be sacrificed. As a result, it is imperative that the Scottish Government makes clear that schools can return to teaching courses leading to exams over third and fourth year to enable pupils to study for up to eight courses again. This will ensure that pupils approaching S4 exams during the time of the review and any subsequent implementation do not lose out.